

Statement of Secretary of Education Rod Paige
On the DC School Choice Initiative
Before the House Committee on Government Reform
June 24, 2003

Chairman Davis and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Bush Administration's proposal to initiate a program to expand school choice in the District of Columbia in fiscal year 2004. I welcome the opportunity to describe our proposal and explain our reasons for putting it forward. I am also very pleased to appear at this hearing with Mayor Anthony Williams, who has been, and will continue to be, our partner in developing this initiative. I truly appreciate the Mayor's willingness to work with us, and the relationship we have developed around the simple idea that wider educational options can benefit the children of the District of Columbia.

This hearing occurs very close to the anniversary of a very historic moment in the history of educational choice in America. On Friday, we will observe the one-year anniversary of the Supreme Court's decision in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, the case that determined that a properly structured school voucher program is constitutional. When the Court announced that decision, I hailed it as one that could open doors of opportunity to thousands of children and could transform the educational landscape in our country. That statement is worth repeating today, as we think about how to improve and reform elementary and secondary education in Washington, D.C..

Mr. Chairman, I know that officials in my Department and Members of Congress have been concerned about the quality of education in the District of Columbia for many years. D.C. public schools are only a short walk from our offices, we see District students going to and from school each day, and we read about the challenges of the D.C. public schools in the newspapers almost daily. We all want the capital of the greatest nation on earth to have some of the finest schools on earth. At one time this city's schools were considered among the best in the entire Nation. But for many years we have been disappointed by the performance of public schools in the District, and at the seeming inability of public school officials to manage schools and programs effectively.

In some respects, the situation in the District may be no different from that in other urban school districts that educate large numbers of children living in poverty, but in other respects the District has sometimes seemed uniquely resistant to reform and improvement. I say that with full respect for Superintendent Vance and with appreciation for what he is trying to accomplish and for some of the things he has achieved, but I think it's the truth.

Let's consider the performance of D.C. students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP as it's called, the assessment that measures the performance of students over time in reading, writing, math, and other core academic subjects. In the most recent mathematics assessment, administered in 2000, only 6 percent of D.C. fourth-graders tested at the "proficient" or "advanced" levels, the levels that show that students have demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter. A lower percentage of students in D.C. demonstrated proficiency than was the case for any State. At the other end of the scale, 76 percent of D.C. fourth-graders scored at the

“below basic” level, which means that they could not demonstrate even partial mastery of the math skills and knowledge that are appropriate at the fourth-grade level. The 2000 8th-grade math results were very similar; only 6 percent of D.C. students tested at the “proficient” or “advanced” levels, and 77 percent were “below basic.”

The most recent NAEP reading assessment took place in 2002, and the National Assessment Governing Board announced the results just last week. The results for D.C. students were a little better than the 2000 math scores, but still were completely inadequate. Only 10 percent of D.C. fourth-graders could read proficiently, while 69 percent were “below basic.” At the 8th-grade level, 9 percent were “proficient” or “advanced” and 52 percent were “below basic.”

Looking at the quality of a school system requires more than just reviewing scores on achievement tests. But when we look at other indicators, they too show that D.C. public schools are not providing the education that children in the District need or deserve. The most recent edition of *Quality Counts*, the annual review of education trends and data produced by the newspaper *Education Week*, gave the District a grade of only a D+ for having an acceptable system of academic standards and accountability, a C in the area of success in recruiting new teachers, and a D+ for school climate. The D.C. public school system has a long history of management problems in such important areas as facilities maintenance, personnel and payroll, food service, procurements, and even in accurately counting enrollments. In addition, the system has historically failed to comply with the requirements of Federal programs, such as Title I and Special Education, to a point where the Department has had to enter into compliance agreements with the District that call for implementation of major reforms within specific timelines. We insisted on

these agreements not because some paperwork wasn't being filled out correctly, but because the District was, for instance, failing quite egregiously to provide its disabled students with the free appropriate public education required under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

I would like to repeat what I said a few minutes ago: I support and respect the work that Paul Vance is doing in the District. I know that he has taken on the major management problems and having been a big-city school superintendent myself, I know that turning around a system is not easy. And Superintendent Vance has shown some results. The District's Stanford-9 achievement test scores for 2002 showed minor improvements at most grade levels in reading and math. And the proliferation of charter schools in the District, including some that have achieved great initial success, has given more choices and greater hopes to students and parents. But I believe the preponderance of information demonstrates that schools in the District are not achieving what they should and that more needs to be done if children in the District are to achieve to the high levels called for under the *No Child Left Behind Act*.

The Bush Administration has responded to this problem by including, in our fiscal year 2004 budget request, a school choice initiative for D.C.. You might ask whether expanding educational choice to include private-school options is appropriate for the District, whether it is likely to work, whether giving students wider educational opportunities is likely to help the D.C. public school system improve, and whether we should, instead, request more money for D.C. public schools. Let me address those issues.

We believe that the President's budget includes more than adequate support for D.C.'s public schools, including charter schools. Our request for Department of Education elementary and secondary education formula programs would provide some \$92 million to the District in 2004, an increase of 15 percent over the level only two years ago (2002). And let's not forget that D.C. already spends, per student, more than all but a handful of urban districts across the country. If money were the solution, than we would have solved the problems of public schooling in the District a long time ago. We believe, instead, that tackling this problem will depend in large measure on giving D.C. students more educational choices.

In the communities across the country that have experimented with publicly and privately funded school choice programs that include private-school options, the results have been extremely positive, for the students directly served by the programs and for the school system as a whole. For example, research by Patrick Wolf of Georgetown University, along with Paul Peterson and Martin West of Harvard, on the first two years of the scholarship program administered by the privately funded Washington Scholarship Fund (WSF), showed that the math and reading achievement of African-American students who enrolled in private schools using support from the Fund was significantly higher than the achievement of a control group of students who remained in D.C. public schools. This research also found that parents who received support from the Fund gave their children's schools higher ratings than did parents of children in the control group, and that their children were doing more homework. Studies by these and equally eminent scholars in other cities, such as Milwaukee, San Antonio, Cleveland, and Dayton, offer very similar results.

What about the charge that voucher programs “cream” the best students from the public schools and thereby weaken public school systems? We find no evidence to buttress that claim. To the contrary, research by Caroline Hoxby of Harvard and others has found that students who take advantage of private school choice options are typically at least as educationally and economically disadvantaged as students who remain in the public schools. To some extent, this is because existing choice programs have explicitly targeted children from low-income families, as our initiative would do. But even without this targeting, programs that include private-school options seem to attract students who are no more affluent, and have no better an educational profile, than other students. In addition, there is at least preliminary evidence that school districts in which public schools have been exposed to private-school competition, through a choice program, have responded by improving educational services. In Milwaukee and in the Edgewood district in San Antonio, the presence of a choice program was associated with gains in achievement in the public schools.

Those findings are consistent with my own experience directing the Houston Independent School District, the Nation’s seventh-largest. In Houston, we didn’t resist school choice; we embraced it. We created a system of charter schools even before the State did. We let children in low-performing schools take their share of the funding -- \$3,750 a year – to a private school. I believe that our acceptance of choice, our willingness to compete with charter and public schools, helped us to make the changes we needed to make in order to achieve the learning gains for which we received national acclaim.

For these reasons, the Administration has put forward our proposal. The outlines of this proposal are very simple. The President's budget request for fiscal year 2004 includes \$75 million for a national Choice Incentive Fund. Under this program, the Department would make grants to support projects that provide low-income parents, particularly those who have children attending low-performing public schools, with the opportunity to transfer their children to higher-performing public and private schools, including charter schools. A portion of the money would be reserved for the District of Columbia.

We anticipate making a grant either to the D.C. public school system or to another, independent entity to operate the program in the District. The grantee would then develop and implement procedures for certifying schools to participate in the program, informing D.C. families about the choices available to them, selecting students to participate, and then monitoring and reporting on the program as it goes forward. The proposal in our budget did not specify the maximum amount of assistance an individual student could receive, but we want it to be sufficient to allow students a good choice of educational options.

We also see accountability as a major feature of this initiative, because it will give parents in D.C. the ability to hold schools accountable for meeting the educational needs of students. And we will provide for a rigorous evaluation of the project in D.C. (as well as the other projects funded by the national Choice Incentive Fund) by examining the academic achievement of students, parental satisfaction, and other results, so that the lessons can be applied to future programs and initiatives. We want to obtain solid evidence on the benefits of expanding educational options and making schools

accountable to parents while respecting the flexibility and freedom of participating private schools.

Mr. Chairman, I know that this proposal has engendered a great deal of attention in the media and elsewhere, including some vociferous criticism. Before I end my statement, I would like to respond to some of the major criticisms, to set the record straight.

We've heard that the Administration is trying to impose this initiative on the District against the will of its citizens and with no input from its elected and appointed leadership. That is not the case. We have met not only with Mayor Williams, but with Councilman Kevin Chavous, who is the Chairman of the Council's Education Committee, and with School Board President Peggy Cooper Cafritz to discuss our proposal, and we look forward to continuing our discussions with these and other local officials. I would like to commend these officials for the courage they have shown in publicly endorsing a D.C. school choice initiative and their willingness to work with us on the details. We want to implement a choice program that reflects the needs of the District and reflects the input of D.C.'s leadership; we don't pretend to have all the answers.

I acknowledge that a choice initiative that includes private school options will probably not, in the end, be what some of the political leaders in the District want. It is, however, what I believe the parents want. The Washington Scholarship Fund has a waiting list of approximately 5,000 children. One D.C. parent, Virginia Walden-Ford, the leader of D.C. Parents for School Choice, testified before Councilman Chavous's committee and said the following:

We have received hundreds of calls from parents who have not been lucky enough to get a scholarship through the many scholarship groups in town, WSF, Black Student Fund, etc., and parents who are camping out for charter schools that are not keeping up the pace of parents' need to get out of failing schools. They contact us looking for better options for their children. Parents here in the District are daily expressing their frustration in a school system that is taking too long to fix itself.

I note also that a majority of people in the District of Columbia support choice, including choice that includes private school options. In a 1998 Washington Post poll, 56 percent of D.C. residents said that they supported using Federal money to help send the city's low-income students to private or parochial schools, while only 36 percent opposed. For African-Americans this support was even stronger – 60 percent were in favor – and among African-Americans with annual incomes of under \$50,000, it was even stronger, with 65 percent in favor.

We in the Department have also heard that that this initiative will bleed money from the District's public schools. That is also not the case. The Choice Incentive Fund proposed by the President represents new money. It was not obtained by subtracting funds from the other Federal programs that support D.C. public schools. If the initiative does not go forward in the District, my guess is that the money will be used in other communities to expand educational choices and improve educational outcomes in those communities.

We've also heard complaints that we are supporting a voucher program when we could be supporting the District's charter schools instead. We find this complaint especially interesting since it has recently been voiced by some who were never strong charter school supporters before. But that's all right with us because we strongly support charter schools too. We will continue to fight to make sure the President's charter school

funding priorities are fulfilled, especially on the facilities front, so that this vibrant movement can keep flourishing.

And, finally, we've heard that all the Administration cares about is launching a voucher program in the District, that we don't care about the children who will remain in the public school system. That couldn't be farther from the truth. Our Department has a record of reaching out to the D.C. Public Schools, to work with the system on overcoming its problems, of providing it with information, technical assistance, and other resources. We've adopted individual schools in the District and provided those schools with hands-on assistance. In our meetings with D.C. officials, we have said that we will continue these efforts, and I'm happy to state that in public today. The choice initiative should be just one element in an effort to improve education in the District and ensure that all children can achieve to high standards. We want to contribute to the larger effort as well.

Let me close with a quotation from Dr. Howard Fuller, the former superintendent of schools in Milwaukee, currently the Director of the Institute for the Transformation of Learning at Marquette University, and a strong advocate of opening up wider educational choices for children and parents. Dr. Fuller has said:

In America, it is virtually impossible for our children to bring their dreams to reality without an education. Unfortunately, far too many of our children are not only having their dreams deferred, they are having them destroyed. They are being destroyed by educational systems that are undereducating them, miseducating them, and pushing them out by the thousands every day. We must have a sense of urgency about changing this unacceptable situation.

It is that "sense of urgency" that drives this proposal.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. I would be happy to respond to any questions that the Committee may have.